

Bruce, Robert V.

A HAND FOR HELEN KELLER

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A Hand for Helen Keller

Though Mabel Bell once accused her husband of regarding deaf people as "cases," her own sensitivity surely colored her judgment. Only a callous man could have been untouched by the appeals for help and advice that came to Bell. The letters were eloquent not so much in their rhetoric as in their simple statements of fact. "I have been slowly growing deaf for three years and now cannot hear general conversation," wrote Miss Margaret Stark of Delaware, Ohio; "I am forty-three years old." Ellery P. Ingham had managed to establish himself as a lawyer in Laporte, Pennsylvania, but had been growing very deaf over the last four or five years. "I am yet a young man and a long life of *silence* and poverty makes me draw a long breath when I think of it," he wrote. The slow, inexorable closing in of silence, the noiseless decay of lifelong hopes, pervaded these plain tales like a nightmare. "Cases" or not, Bell reached out his hand.

In the earlier years of his fame, Bell sometimes got inquiries about the possibility of his inventing an electrical device to aid in hearing. He had come to recognize his limits as an electrical inventor, however. Before he died, the Bell System's manufacturing affiliate Western Electric had begun developing such hearing aids. But Bell himself could only expose fraudulent gadgets and advise his correspondents as to speechreading courses. In time, as his campaigns for articulation and speechreading began winning public notice, the appeals tended more often toward those subjects to begin with. After Mabel's paper on speechreading was published in 1895, he often enclosed a copy of it with his reply.

In the letters of adults about whom deafness had begun to close, there was the terror of those who knew what they were losing. In letters from parents of deaf children, there was the eagerness of those who had come to terms with despair and now suddenly heard a whisper of hope. In advising them, Bell did his best to steer between deadening caution and false op-

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From: Bruce Robert V. Bell; Alexander Graham Bell
and the Conquest of Solitude, Boston;
Little, Brown and Company 1973.

timism. He stressed the importance of speech training at an early age, if possible as early as that at which hearing children began learning to speak.

Even after Bell's death, Charles Crane of Chicago vividly remembered the long-ago shock of discovering that his eighteen-month-old daughter Josephine had been deafened by illness. Hearing of Bell's interest in the deaf, he had gone at once to see Bell in Washington. When he telephoned for an appointment, "the secretary replied that Dr. Bell was too busy to see anyone, but when I proceeded to state that I was the father of a deaf baby and wished Dr. Bell's advice, the secretary replied that Dr. Bell always dropped everything [in such cases] . . . and for me to come to the house at once." Bell recommended a speech teacher, outlined a course of study, and came to Chicago several times to follow up the child's progress. Little Josephine Crane learned to speak and to read lips so well that few who met her realized that she was deaf. Eventually she married happily and raised a large family.

Bell must have welcomed letters from deaf children, especially those he had helped rescue. He preserved a file of such notes. "I saw a picture of you recently," wrote Belle Munger of Eureka, Kansas, in 1892, "and it brought our journey two years ago, to my memory. You asked me then to write to you. I remember how you amused me all day with your queer watch, opening the case when I blew upon it; then you made it walk and dance. You also told me about your children and how much fun you had with them in the summer, rowing and climbing. . . . We live eight miles from town on a farm. . . . Last Sunday I was nine." "His dominating passion is his love for children," Helen Keller once wrote of Bell. "He is never quite so happy as when he has a little deaf child in his arms."

Bell loved to visit classes, and the children loved to see him. His own account of a visit to a Providence school for the deaf in 1893 recaptures that warm communion. "Some of the youngest children in the school somehow got the idea that I was no less an individual than Santa Claus himself!" he reported to Mabel.

I accepted the situation and described in graphic terms my driving over the tops of the houses. Pandemonium reigned for a time, and the children were much puzzled to know how so big a body could come down so small a chimney. I taught them the word "squeeze" so that they will never forget it!!! I'm afraid that half of the school will write to me before Christmas and I shall have to visit the school in appropriate costume!

Sarah Fuller's pioneer public day school in Boston had prospered. In 1877 its name was changed from the Boston School for Deaf Mutes to the

Horace Mann School; and as its enrollment grew, it moved to larger quarters, until in 1890 it settled in a new building in the Back Bay. But institutional growth did not mean individual prosperity, and so Bell sent Miss Fuller money year after year to buy better clothes for children who needed them, and otherwise to make life easier for them.

Bell also did what he could to help young deaf people support themselves. "There are very few positions in life which cannot be occupied by deaf persons," he told the public. "Nearly all the arts and industries are open to them, and many of the professions." But he was not in a position to give them work directly. The only time on record when Bell asked a special favor of the Bell Telephone Company in the name of his contribution to the industry was in 1883, when he urged President Forbes to employ a few deaf people. Bell specifically recommended a former pupil of his. But there was no vacancy suitable for the young man, nor does it appear that the company subsequently reserved any openings for the deaf.

Bell's interest in young George Sanders was more personal. As there are hearing people who have no ear for music, so there are deaf people who have no eye for speech. George seems to have been one of these. But Bell found the fact hard to accept. He conceded the benefits to George of enrollment at fifteen in the National College for Deaf Mutes in 1882, but he was troubled by the college's lack of courses in speech and speechreading. George "is dearer to me than he or any one else knows," Bell wrote George's maternal grandmother in 1884. "I have no son — not even a nephew — to stand between him and my heart — and I long for the confidential companionship of a young man such as he is growing to be." He hoped that George would visit "often enough to feel at *home*." But George probably sensed Bell's disappointment at his inability to read speech. At any rate, the relationship does not seem to have been as close as Bell had hoped it might be.

At the funeral of Thomas Sanders's mother in 1890, Bell found that George "has grown to be a manly fellow and everyone likes him." George had fallen in love with a deaf girl in whose family a history of deafness ran back through four generations. Bell warned Lucy Swett that marriage to George, who like her was congenitally deaf, would increase the likelihood that her children would be deaf. But Lucy felt that George would surely marry a deaf girl anyway, and she wanted to be the one. "She is a very sweet girl," Bell wrote Mabel, "and I do not wonder that George is in love. . . . Will lovers ever consider the good of those that will come after them?" He regretted that the answer seemed to be no. Yet, he wrote, "I can understand it too."

In 1891, after George and Lucy had married, Thomas Sanders lost nearly

all his money. Through most of the nineties, Bell saw to it that the young couple got along. He gave George work as a printer in the bureau he had set up for the collection and dissemination of information about the deaf, and from time to time he gave or lent George substantial sums. By 1898, George Sanders was costing Bell about two thousand dollars a year. But in 1899 George began making good in a small printing business near Philadelphia, and that drain on Bell's finances ceased.

Among the deaf were those who, like Mabel Bell, insisted that they would rather live sightless but warmed by voices in the dark, than encased in the cold, bright solitude of deafness. Among them also were those for whom even the solitude was dark. They were the deaf-blind.

Bell knew the deaf-blind, too. In the crucial month of February 1876 he had managed to attend a memorial service to the late Samuel Gridley Howe, head of the Perkins Institution for the Blind, and there he had "quite a little talk" by means of finger spelling with Howe's most famous pupil, Laura Bridgman. At two she had lost sight, hearing, even most of her senses of smell and taste. Little remained to make her living body more than the sealed tomb of her mind. But Howe touched that mind and found it responsive. So Laura discovered the existence of the world and learned something of what it held. At the services for her dead teacher, she cried. "The whole scene was one I shall long remember," wrote Bell at the time.

Early in 1887, Captain Arthur H. Keller, a former Confederate officer who had become a newspaper editor in Tusculum, Alabama, brought his six-year-old deaf-blind daughter Helen to Bell in Washington. Helen was a healthy child, excited to something like happiness by what she felt of the novel journey. Bell may have seen irony in the contrast of her eager gropings with her father's sadness. Yet in her well-shaped face, for all its intimations of dormant intelligence, there seemed to be an indefinable, chilling emptiness. Bell listened to the story of the illness that had left Helen completely deaf and sightless at nineteen months. Something in his touch, Helen remembered years later, gave her an impression of tenderness and sympathy. She sat on his knee and felt his watch strike. He understood her rudimentary signs, and she knew it and loved him at once. "But I did not dream," she wrote in later years, "that that interview would be the door through which I should pass from darkness into light."

According to Helen, Bell unlocked that door with the suggestion that Keller write Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution. As it happened, Anagnos was already prepared. A friend of Keller's studying at the Lawrence Scientific School in Cambridge had spoken to Anagnos about Helen's case months earlier, perhaps at the instance of Helen's mother, who

had read about Laura Bridgman in Dickens's *American Notes*. Then, on the strength of a tentative inquiry from Keller himself in the summer of 1886, Anagnos had alerted one of his star graduates to the possibility of such a call. She had since been studying Howe's carefully recorded methods in the case of Laura Bridgman and spending much time with Laura. Presumably Bell's opinion in February 1887 rekindled Keller's interest or settled his doubts about Helen's educability. At any rate Keller wrote again to Anagnos and thereby initiated the astonishing life work of Annie M. Sullivan.

Annie was then twenty years old, still haunted by the horrors of her four childhood years in the Tewksbury, Massachusetts, poorhouse, still suffering from the effects of trachoma which had once and would again make her blind, but soon to be called by Mark Twain and others "the miracle worker" and by Helen Keller simply "Teacher." It was on March 3, 1887, that Annie Sullivan arrived in Tuscumbia. That day was to be cherished by Helen Keller as her "soul's birthday." It also happened to be the fortieth birthday of Alexander Graham Bell.

"A miracle has happened," wrote Annie on March 20; "the wild little creature of two weeks ago has been transformed into a gentle child." On April 5 came Helen's famous breakthrough to the understanding that things had names, and three months later she was writing letters. Bell followed the Tuscumbia "miracle" with wonder, as did the public after Michael Anagnos sounded the trumpet. Bell himself helped to spread the news, furnishing a New York paper in 1888 with Helen's picture and one of her letters to him. He saw a wider good coming from the dazzling emergence of her mind. "The public have already become interested in Helen Keller," he wrote in 1891, "and through her, may perhaps be led to take an interest in the more general subject of the Education of the Deaf."

In one respect, Bell stood alone among Helen Keller's admirers and celebrators. He insisted that what Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller between them had done was not a miracle but a brilliantly successful experiment. "It is . . . a question of instruction we have to consider," he wrote, "and not a case of supernatural acquirement." He interviewed Helen himself to measure that acquirement and pressed Annie Sullivan for explanations of it, especially of Helen's command of idiomatic English. From what Annie reported, he found the key in her constant spelling of natural, idiomatic English into Helen's hand without stopping to explain unfamiliar words and constructions, and in her encouragement of Helen's reading book after book in Braille or raised type, with a similar reliance on context to explain new language. This, as Bell pointed out, was the equivalent of the way a hearing child learned English. And it supported his long-standing emphasis

on the use of the English language with deaf children, including the use of books. Indeed, he saw the importance of books in the early stages of educating the deaf as "the chief lesson, I think, to be learned from the case of Helen Keller."

At the 1891 AAPTSD summer meeting, Bell gave each member a copy of a handsomely bound "Helen Keller Souvenir," containing accounts of Helen's education by Annie Sullivan and others, among them Sarah Fuller, who had recently given Helen her first lessons in speech. At the Association's expense, Helen and Miss Sullivan came in person to the 1893 meeting in Chicago, and Helen "saw" the World's Fair through the hands of Bell and her teacher; the tour included an exhibit of Bell's Centennial Exhibition telephone. Teachers of the deaf met her and, it was reported, "saw and heard enough to remove all their doubts." A year later, at the AAPTSD Chautauqua meeting, Annie Sullivan delivered — or rather, out of last-minute shyness, asked Bell to deliver for her — an eloquent, yet objective, account of her work and relations with Helen. And in 1896, Helen herself proudly addressed the AAPTSD. "If you knew all the joy I feel in being able to speak to you to-day," she said, "I think you would have some idea of the value of speech to the deaf. . . . One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar."

Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan were, however, much more to Bell than phenomena or specimens. They were his friends, and he was theirs. "It was an immense advantage for one of my temper, impatience, and antagonisms to know Dr. Bell intimately over a long period of time," said Annie in retrospect.

Gifted with a voice that itself suggested genius, he spoke the English language with a purity and charm which have never been surpassed by anyone I have heard speak. I listened to every word fascinated. . . . I never felt at ease with anyone until I met him. I was extremely conscious of my crudeness. . . . Dr. Bell had a happy way of making people feel pleased with themselves. He had a remarkable faculty of bringing out the best that was in them. After a conversation with him I felt released, important, communicative. All the pent-up resentment within me went out. . . . I learned more from him than from anyone else. He imparted knowledge with a beautiful courtesy that made one proud to sit at his feet and learn. He answered every question in the cool, clear light of reason . . . [with] no trace of animus against individuals, nations, or classes. If he wished to criticize and he often did, he began by pointing out something good I had done in another direction.

When asked long after Bell's death what, aside from her feeling for Helen,



Bell with Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, July 1894

had enabled her to keep at so exacting a task for so many years, she replied, "I think it must have been Dr. Bell — his faith in me."

Bell's own daughters felt a touch of jealousy at his feeling for Helen Keller. For her part, one of her early letters, written a few months after her teacher first came to her, was to "Dear Mr. Bell," and it said among other things, "I do love you." And more than thirty years later, when he was seventy-one, she wrote him, "Even before my teacher came, you held out a warm hand to me in the dark. . . . You followed step by step my teacher's efforts. . . . When others doubted, it was you who heartened us. . . . You have always shown a father's joy in my successes and a father's tenderness when things have not gone right."

More than once in those thirty years, things went wrong for Helen Keller, and Bell was there with a helping hand. A short story, "The Frost King," which she wrote in 1891 at the age of eleven for Anagnos's birthday and which Anagnos then published, was found to echo the plot and wording of a children's fairy tale published nearly twenty years earlier, a story unknown to Annie Sullivan and not in the books available to Helen. It turned out to have been read to her at the home of a friend in Annie's absence more than three years earlier. At the Perkins Institution a solemn committee (Mark Twain in his outrage called it "a collection of decayed human turnips") cross-questioned the bewildered and frightened child at great length, with Annie Sullivan sent out of the room, before concluding that Helen had unwittingly summoned up the story from her remarkable memory rather than from her imagination as she supposed. The ordeal crushed Helen's spirit and her joy in books for months and shook her confidence in her own originality for years.

The kindly author of the original story, Margaret Canby, wrote that Helen's version was no plagiarism but "a wonderful feat of memory" and an improvement on the source. "Please give her my warm love," added Miss Canby, "and tell her not to feel troubled over it any more." Mark Twain was more emphatic, recalling the time he himself had unconsciously plagiarized a passage from Oliver Wendell Holmes. "To think of those solemn donkeys breaking a little child's heart with their ignorant damned rubbish about plagiarism!" he wrote. "I couldn't sleep for blaspheming about it last night." Bell, who had helped Annie Sullivan trace Helen's exposure to the story, saw further than either Twain or Miss Canby. Like them, he pointed out that "we all do what Helen did," that "our most original compositions are composed exclusively of expressions derived from others." But he also observed that Anagnos had "failed to grasp the importance of the Frost King incident," and that "a full investigation will

throw light on the manner in which Helen has acquired her marvelous knowledge of language — and do much good.”

After a long talk with Helen in 1894, Bell heartily seconded her “strong desire” to be educated in a school for normal students rather than a special school for the deaf or the blind. Bell reminded Captain Keller that his daughter would need a special interpreter in any case, so that a school for the handicapped could offer her no practical advantage. He promised to rally Helen’s friends to the underwriting of any expenses. Thus Helen went on to achieve what throughout her life would be one of her chief consolations and sources of pride: acceptance as an intellectual and social equal by people who could see and hear.

In 1897 Arthur Gilman, headmaster of the Cambridge School at which Helen was preparing for Radcliffe College, decided that Miss Sullivan was endangering Helen’s health by pressing her too hard in her studies. Having temporarily persuaded Helen’s mother of this, he tried to separate Helen from her beloved teacher. Gilman did his best to win Bell’s support for the move. But Bell had boundless faith in the wisdom and dedication of Annie Sullivan, and when she appealed to him for help he dispatched his assistant, the venerable John Hitz, to investigate. Afterward Bell wrote Gilman that nothing could justify parting Helen and Annie except evidence that Annie was in some way unfit for her charge; and as to that, his free conversation with Helen had revealed her to be a “living testimonial to the character of Miss Sullivan.” Mrs. Keller hurried to Massachusetts and, finding Helen in excellent health and determined to stay with Annie, agreed with Hitz and Bell that Gilman was wrong. Never again was it to be suggested that Helen and Annie Sullivan should be parted.

Three years later, just as Helen entered Radcliffe, a well-intentioned friend nearly persuaded her to withdraw and, with Annie Sullivan, to start and direct a school for deaf-blind children. Bell’s decided opposition to the scheme, along with that of other friends, kept Helen in college and out of what would surely have been a fiasco.

Bell’s doubts of his own business acumen led him to decline the suggestion that he administer a trust fund set up for Helen in 1896. Nevertheless he took a leading part in organizing the arrangement and contributed a thousand dollars to it. Before and after, he helped out on special occasions, sending Helen \$400 when her father died in 1896, \$100 toward a country vacation in the summer of 1899, \$194 so that Helen could surprise Annie with a wedding gift when Annie married the writer and critic John Macy in 1905. Financial as well as moral support may have led Annie to write early in 1898 that Bell “will never know how deeply grateful I am to him for one of the richest and fullest years we have ever known.”

Among Helen's friends and admirers were those who were richer than Bell and less deeply committed to the support of other causes. In dollar terms their gifts to Helen outstripped those of Bell. But he gave her things they could not match with money. "More than anyone else, during those [early] years," wrote a friend who knew Helen in later life, "it was Alexander Graham Bell who gave Helen her first conception of the progress of mankind, telling her as much about science as Phillips Brooks told her about religion." Bell thrilled her with stories that paralleled the Greek epics she loved, Promethean tales like that of the laying of the Atlantic cable. One day he placed her hand on a telephone pole and asked her what it meant to her, then explained that the wires it carried sang of life and death, war and finance, fear and joy, failure and success, that they pierced the barriers of space and touched mind to mind throughout the world.

But Bell's mind, and Helen's through his, responded to nature too. Once, beneath an oak, he placed her hand on the trunk, and she felt the soft crepitation of raindrops on the leaves. For years after that she liked to touch trees in the rain. Then, on another day, he went with her to Niagara Falls and put her hand on the hotel window pane so that she could sense the thunder of the river plunging over its shuddering escarpment. He drove with her and Annie from Washington into the springtime countryside, where they gathered wild azalea, honeysuckle, and dogwood blossoms.

More than once Helen visited Beinn Bhreagh. She spent one night with Elsie and Daisy on the houseboat, from which they all climbed down by a rope ladder to swim in the moonlit lake. There in the fields overlooking the Bras d'Or, Bell told her of his kite flying and his hope of giving wings to mankind. "He makes you feel that if you only had a little more time, you, too, might be an inventor," she wrote. One windy day she helped him fly his kites.

On one of them I noticed that the strings were of wire, and having had some experience in bead work, I said I thought they would break. Dr. Bell said "No!" with great confidence, and the kite was sent up. It began to pull and tug, and lo, the wires broke, and off went the great red dragon, and poor Dr. Bell stood looking forlornly after it. After that he asked me if the strings were all right and changed them at once when I answered in the negative. Altogether we had great fun.

Back at Radcliffe that summer of 1901, she wrote Mabel that "the smell of the ocean and the fragrance of the pines have followed me to Cambridge and linger about me like a benediction."

Now and then Bell thought about Helen's future course in life. As she

made her way through college, he began to feel that "with her gifts of mind and imagination there should be a great future open to her in literature." Later he wrote her, "You must not put me among those who think that 'nothing you have to say about the affairs of the universe would be interesting.'" But Helen was more realistic about the limits put upon her direct apprehension of the world, about her inescapable dependence on the words of others for learning what eyes and ears tell most people. She knew also that to the public her blindness was her foremost characteristic, though she agreed with Mabel that deafness was the heavier cross. So her work came to be more and more that of helping the cause of the blind. And because Bell's work lay with the deaf, he and she saw less of each other as the new century wore on.

Each missed the other. When he tried his hand at a letter in Braille, while she was in college, she praised him for not making a single mistake. "It seemed almost as if you clasped my hand in yours and spoke to me in the old, dear way," she wrote him. In 1907 he wrote her, "I often think of you and feel impelled to write but — as you know — I am a busy man, and . . . have always lots of back correspondence to make up." Now and then he wrote again in Braille, but not often enough for it to be easy. He spent a few days in Boston once and tried for a long time one day to telephone Helen's Wrentham home, but Mrs. Macy heard the ringing too late. "We seem bound every time to miss seeing him," Helen wrote John Hitz on that occasion. As public figures, each knew in a general way what the other was doing. "I suppose," wrote Helen in 1902, "Mr. Bell has nothing but kites and flying-machines on his tongue's end. Poor dear man, how I wish he would stop wearing himself out in this unprofitable way — at least it seems unprofitable to me." But six years later, she sent him a note of congratulation on his successes in aviation, to which he replied in proud detail.

In January 1907 Helen wired Bell, "I need you." She was to speak in New York at a meeting for the blind; but Annie, who usually repeated her speech for those who might have difficulty understanding it, had come down with a cold. Bell left Washington at once and lent his matchless voice to the occasion.

In the summer of 1918, Helen asked Bell to play himself in a motion picture of her life. He was then seventy-one, in uncertain health, more susceptible than ever to summer heat, and had "the greatest aversion to appearing in a moving-picture." Still, her letter touched him deeply. "It brings back recollections of the little girl I met in Washington so long ago," he wrote her. "You will," he reminded her, "have to find someone with dark hair to impersonate the Alexander Graham Bell of your childhood." But he promised to appear with her in a later scene, when the hot weather

was over, if she wanted him to. To his great relief he was not called upon — which was just as well, since the film was a grotesque failure, both as drama and as history.

The drama of Helen Keller's rescue and rise had, after all, been given a far more enduring form in her own autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, fifteen years before. Supplemented by her own and Annie Sullivan's letters, it both recounted and attested to one of history's most moving triumphs. And it began with the words:

To

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL

Who has taught the deaf to speak
and enabled the listening ear to hear
speech from the Atlantic to the Rockies,
I Dedicate
this Story of My Life.

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